

## CONCEPT 4: THE PEOPLE: ENCOUNTERING THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI DELTA REGION

### GOAL

The diversity of the Lower Mississippi Delta region's cultural heritage is reflected in the names of cities and towns up and down the river: Ste. Genevieve, Kaskaskia, Altonburg, Wittenburg, Cape Girardeau, Cairo, Hickman, Helena, Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Venice. The Mississippi River and its associated bounty not only sustained the region's first inhabitants, the Indians, but have in succeeding centuries attracted immigrants from around the world.

This goal of this concept is to illustrate, through the use of existing facilities and activities, opportunities for visitors to experience the richness of the history, the complexity of social and cultural interactions, and the historic sites, festivals, and other celebrations of cultural diversity in the Delta.

### IMPORTANCE/SIGNIFICANCE

Over the previous centuries, many cultures converged in the rich natural areas of the Lower Mississippi Delta region. From approximately A.D. 700 to the arrival of the first European explorers during the 16th century, the mound building Mississippians thrived, establishing complex social, political, and economic relationships within and beyond the Delta. Successive waves of European explorers, armies, and settlers became only the latest inhabitants to have a long ranging impact on the region.

#### American Indian

By now it is a cliché to say that the "New World" was anything but new when Columbus arrived. Less well known, however, is the sheer breath of the pre-Columbian civilizations. Millions of people inhabited the Americas in 1492, most densely along the coast and major rivers, and these indigenous peoples, or American Indians, were discoverers, explorers, warriors, and settlers in

the New World. They spoke over 600 distinct languages. Indian economies varied from farming, to maritime activities, to hunters and gatherers, while Indian artisans were adept at weaving, carving, sculpting, and painting. The pre-Columbian Americas were a teeming world of life — a rich tapestry of cultures with diverse economies, complex religious cosmologies, and sophisticated arts and crafts.<sup>1</sup>

#### Spanish Influence

At the time the Spaniard Hernando de Soto and his expeditionary army landed on the west coast of present-day Florida in 1539, many of the leading Mississippian centers were already in decline. As de Soto's army slogged overland through the Southeast to the Mississippi River, bloody encounters between the Mississippians and the Spanish expedition presaged the Indians eventual loss of their lands and lifeways, as Europeans increasingly penetrated the continent over the succeeding centuries.

Two centuries after de Soto's expedition, during the 1770s, approximately 1,500 Canary Islanders settled in the marshlands southeast of New Orleans (present-day St. Bernard Parish), where they hunted, trapped, and fished for sustenance. Their descendants, known as the Isleños, continue to speak an archaic Spanish dialect and perform traditional decimas — folk songs of 10 syllable lines sung *acapella*.

#### French Culture

During the 17th century, following the successful descent down the Mississippi River by Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle in 1682, the French envisioned establishing a comprehensive commercial system in North America. The Mississippi River offered an all-weather outlet to the sea for the furs of the

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *500 Nations: An Illustrated History of North American Indians*, (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994), 8-9.

northern American lands France dominated, and control of the river's length would both confine the British to the east and open the vast American plains to French exploitation. Though France never realized its grand scheme for North America, French settlements dot the Mississippi Delta region. Descendant French populations still live in southern Illinois and Missouri as well as southeastern Arkansas in such communities as Prairie du Rocher, Kaskaskia, Ste. Genevieve, and Cape Girardeau, Dumas, and in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana.

### **Cajun Culture**

During Great Britain's conquest of the French empire in North America (1754–1763), the British expelled nearly 75%, or over 10,000, of the French Catholic Acadians from Nova Scotia. Many of the displaced Acadians eventually migrated to Louisiana, settling in the eastern prairies and along Bayou Lafourche and the lower Mississippi River, to farm, fish, hunt, and trap, while interacting and intermarrying with their American, Spanish, Indian, and African American neighbors. Today the French derived dialect spoken by the descendants of the Acadians, known as Cajuns (a name given to them by the Indians) can be heard throughout southern Louisiana and their cuisine and music are deeply imbedded in the state's culture.

### **African-American Culture**

Brought to the Delta in slavery, forced to work in bondage and servitude throughout the antebellum years, and freed only with the catastrophe of the Civil War, African-Americans form the very fiber of the social and political tapestry of the Delta. Communities as diverse as Mound Bayou, Mississippi and Fargo, Arkansas; Little Rock, Arkansas and Memphis, Tennessee; and New Orleans and Monroe, Louisiana, illustrate the pride and entrepreneurial spirit of the Delta's black communities.

### **Creole Culture**

The term Creole refers to a diversity of cultural groups. The white Creoles of colonial Louisiana were born of French and Spanish parents before 1803. White Creoles were generally landed gentry, who adopted and retained European culture and mannerisms. In central Louisiana the Cane River Creoles of color emerged during the 18th century from a family of freed slaves. The social stratum occupied by Creoles of color was unique to Louisiana. Some of the Cane River Creoles became wealthy plantation owners and developed their own unique culture, enjoying the respect and friendship of the dominant white Creole society. In the context of racial mixing, Creole could also refer to those of European-Indian descent in Louisiana.

### **Other Cultures**

Many other groups also contributed to the cultural diversity of the Lower Mississippi Delta Region. During the 19th century, German immigrants settled along the Mississippi River above New Orleans and below Cape Girardeau and near Stuttgart, Arkansas. Sephardic Jews migrated to New Orleans from countries ringing the Mediterranean Sea. By the 1830s, Americans and Euro-Americans were migrating eastward across the United States to the Delta, which was then known as the "Southwest Territory." The Irish also came to the Delta in the 1830s and a small community of Filipinos established a fishing village in southern Louisiana. Chinese laborers were recruited from New Orleans and Asia in the 1870s, and a decade later many Jewish, Sicilian, and Lebanese people migrated to the Delta from southern and eastern Europe. By the late 19th century, a Syrian community was established in the Arkansas Delta and a substantial Italian contingent settled in New Orleans.

The Lower Mississippi Delta Region continued to lure immigrants during the 20th century. In the 1950s Cuban immigrants moved to New Orleans and the migration of Vietnamese to southern Louisiana occurred in

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the 1970s. More recently, the largest numbers of immigrants stem from Mexico, the Philippines, Korea, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica.

## RESOURCES

Existing resources that illustrate the diversity of cultures that have resided in the Delta and those that continue to inhabit the region are highlighted in this concept. The resources listed for this concept include historic sites, visitor centers, museums, and festival sites that are presently interpreting and celebrating many of the numerous cultural groups of the Delta.

### Cajun and Creole Cultures

The heritages and influences of the Cajuns and Creoles can currently be encountered at a number of sites in Louisiana (see list of resources accompanying the Concept 4 map). In addition, the following are examples of both extant tours that link representative sites and events that celebrate the Cajun and Creole heritages:

#### Cajun Culture

- Old Spanish Trail, U.S. Highway 90 and LA Highway 182, which travels through the heart of Louisiana's Cajun country (pamphlet/map)
- Acadiana Trail Driving Tour (pamphlet/map)
- The Real French Destination, Louisiana Scenic Byway - St. Landry and Lafayette Parishes (map)
- Zydeco Cajun Prairie, Louisiana Scenic Byway - Evangeline and Acadia Parishes (map)
- Walking and Driving Tours of New Orleans (pamphlets/maps)
- Annual Louisiana Folklife Festival (Monroe, Louisiana)

#### Creole Culture

- Cane River Plantation Tour, Natchitoches Parish (pamphlet/map)
- Town Tour of Natchitoches Historic District (pamphlet/map)
- Annual Candlelight Tour of the Natchitoches Historic District, during the Historic Natchitoches Pilgrimage (pamphlet)
- Annual Northwestern State University Folk Festival (Natchitoches, Louisiana)
- Louisiana Colonial Trails Driving Tour - from Natchez, Mississippi to Natchitoches to the former Spanish Southwest (pamphlet/map)
- Creole Nature Trail Scenic Byway, Louisiana Scenic Byway - Cameron and Calcasieu Parishes (map)
- Walking and Driving Tours of New Orleans (pamphlets/maps)

The Isleño heritage is currently interpreted at the Jean Lafitte Isleño Center in Toca, Louisiana. The New Madrid Museum in New Madrid, Missouri, addresses the Spanish colonial period and in Cape Girardeau, also in Missouri, a marker commemorates the site of La Casa Roja (Red House), an early 18th century trading post and military headquarters of the Spanish District of Cape Girardeau.

#### French Culture

The French heritage in New Orleans is currently represented and interpreted at several sites in the Delta. Ste. Genevieve and Cape Girardeau, Missouri as well as areas in southeast Arkansas represent French cultural influences in the Delta during different historical periods.

## RESOURCES

### American Indian Cultures

- 38. Chucalissa Indian Village (Memphis, Tennessee)
- 40. Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (Philadelphia, Mississippi)
- 41. Tunica-Biloxi Indians of Louisiana (Marksville, Louisiana)
- 42. Pinson Mounds State Archeological Site (Pinson, Tennessee)
- 43. Jena Band of Choctaw (Jena, Louisiana)
- 44. Arkansas Post National Memorial, Menard/Hodges Archeological Site, (Osotuooy) (Gillett, Arkansas)
- 49. Couthatta Tribe (Elton, Louisiana)
- 48. The Chitimacha Tribe (Charenton, Louisiana)

### French and Spanish Influences

- 17. Fort Kaskaskia State Historic Site and Pierre Menard Home (Ellis Grove, Illinois)
- 18. French Colonial Historic District (Prairie Du Rocher, Illinois)
- 19. Cape Girardeau River Heritage Museum (Cape Girardeau, Missouri)
- 20. Ste. Genevieve Museum; Great River Road Interpretive Center; and Historic Ste. Genevieve (St. Genevieve, Missouri)
- 21. Vieux Carré Historic District (New Orleans, Louisiana)
- 39. Parkin Archeological State Park (Parkin, Arkansas)
- 7. Great River Road State Park (Rosedale, Mississippi)

### Cajun Culture

- 4. Acadian Memorial; Statue of Evangeline and the Perpetual Adoration Garden and Historic Cemetery; Evangeline Oak/Evangeline Oak Park; St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church; and Le Maison Duchamp (St. Martinville, Louisiana)
- 5. Konriko Rice Mill (New Iberia, Louisiana)
- 6. Acadiana Visitor Center (Opelousas, Louisiana)
- 35. Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve (New Orleans, Louisiana)
  - 1. Prairie Acadian Cultural Center (Eunice, Louisiana)
  - 2. Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center (Thibodaux, Louisiana)
  - 3. Acadian Cultural Center (Lafayette, Louisiana)

### African-American Culture

- 36. Little Rock High School (Little Rock, Arkansas)
- 37. Mound Bayou, Mississippi

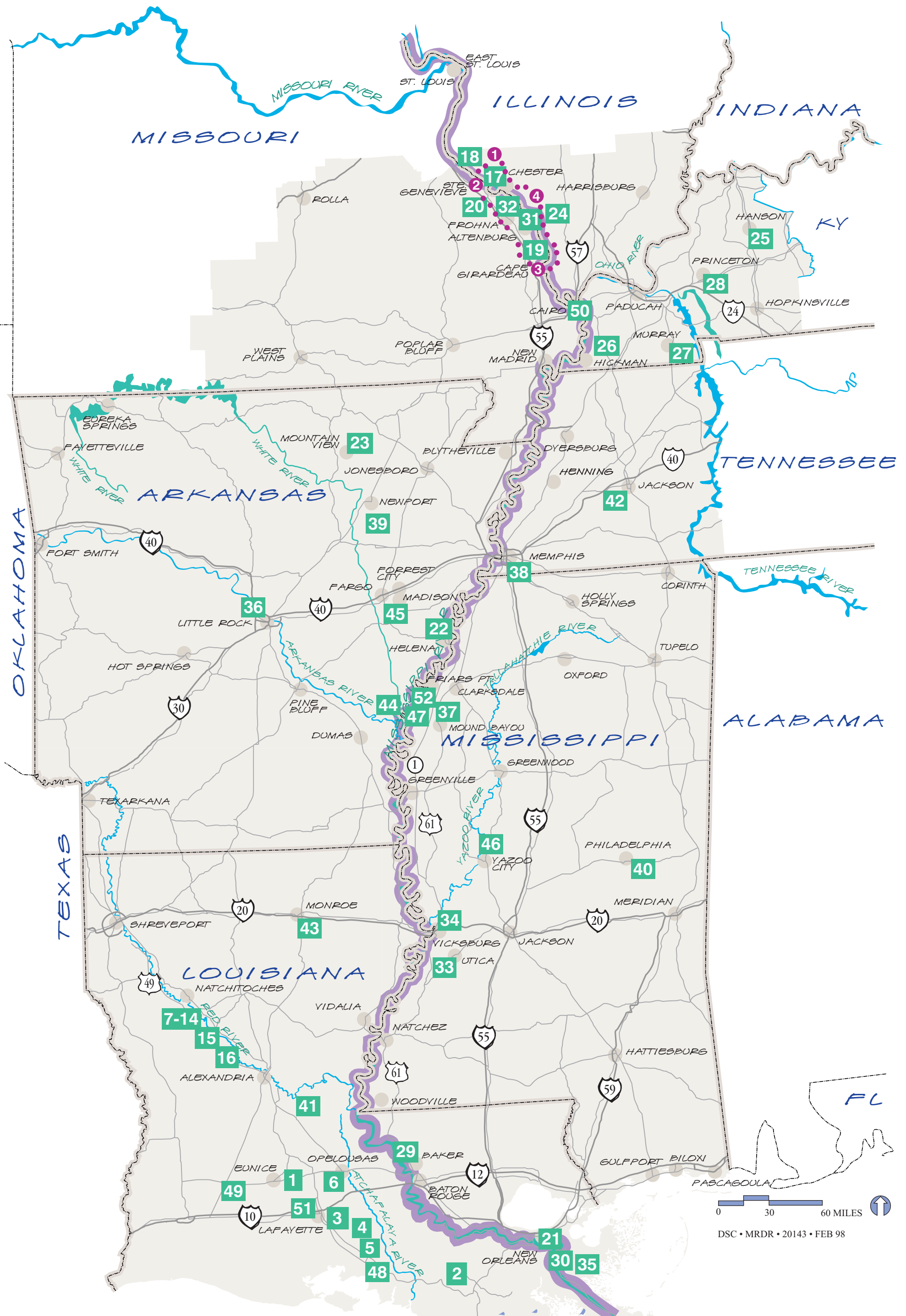
- 38. National Civil Rights Museum (Memphis, Tennessee)
- 45. Madison, Arkansas
- 46. The Oakes African-American Cultural Center (Yazoo City, Mississippi)
- 48. Fargo Agricultural Museum (Fargo, Arkansas)
- 50. Cairo, Illinois
- 51. Arna Bontemps African-American Museum (Lafayette, Louisiana)

### Creole Culture

- 7-12. Melrose Plantation; Magnolia Plantation; Oakland Plantation; Atahoe Plantation; Beau Fort Plantation; Oak Lawn Plantation; Cherokee Plantation; and the Jones House (Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana)
- 13-14. Natchitoches Historic District, Badin-Roque House, (Natchitoches, Louisiana)
- 15. Kate Chopin House and Bayou Folk Museum (Cloutierville, Louisiana)
- 16. St. Augustine Church and Cemetery (Isle Brevelle, Louisiana)

### Other Cultural Influences

- 22. Delta Cultural Center (Helena, Arkansas)
- 23. Ozark Folk Center (Mountain View, Arkansas)
- 24. West Walnut Street Historic District (Carbondale, Illinois)
- 25. Hanson Historic District (Hanson, Kentucky)
- 26. Buchanan Street Historic District (Hickman, Kentucky)
- 27. Wrather West Kentucky Museum (Murray, Kentucky)
- 28. Adsmore Living History Museum (Princeton, Kentucky)
- 29. Heritage Museum (Baker, Louisiana)
- 30. American Italian Museum and Library (New Orleans, Louisiana)
- 31. Concordia Log College/Seminary (Attenburg, Missouri)
- 32. Saxon Lutheran Memorial (Frohna, Missouri)
- 33. Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (Utica, Mississippi)
- 34. Southern Cultural Heritage Complex (Vicksburg, Mississippi)



- 1-4 FRENCH CULTURAL SITES
- ... FRENCH HERITAGE TOUR ROUTE OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS AND MISSOURI
- 1-52 SITES REPRESENTING CULTURAL DIVERSITY (SEE TABLE ABOVE)

Lower Mississippi  
Delta Region  
HERITAGE STUDY

**CONCEPT 4**  
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CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF THE  
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